

BOOK REVIEWS

Nirvana: Concept, Imagery, Narrative. By Steven Collins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 204 pages. Hardcover \$70.00/£40.00, paper \$24.99/£16.99.

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Steven Collins' latest book is a revised version of part 1 of his *Nirvana and Other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). The reason for this revision is to simplify a book that the author believes is "long, complex, expensive, and not easy to use in teaching" (p. 1). This simplification is evident not only in its shorter length but also in the minimal use of the normal scholarly apparatus: there are few footnotes and references, and no citations from primary sources. These changes make it easier to understand Collins' thinking on the treatment of Nirvana in the Pali tradition, and also go some way towards making the book more generally accessible. Despite these changes, however, it is hard to see how it might be suitable for the "General Reader," as Collins hopes (p. 1).

The reason for this is that the book is densely written without an overall argument being made entirely clear. Indeed a clear purpose is not stated in the introduction. Collins first mentions his previous book's "overall argument about nirvana as a part of . . . the discourse about felicity" (p. 1), and then expands this in sections entitled "The Discourse of Felicity: Imagining Happiness" (pp. 3–4) and "*Eu-topia* and *Ou-topia*" (pp. 7–8). In between, however, he also mentions "systematic and narrative thought" and "the philosophical and cultural-historical importance of imagery and metaphor, and their capacity to be a bridge between systematic and narrative thought" (p. 2). The introduction therefore proposes a very ambitious study on utopian thinking according to the imaginative world of Pali texts, especially with regard to their treatment of Nirvana, which will show how imagery connects systematic and narrative thinking.

But once these preliminary concerns have been announced, no more is stated about utopias or felicities. And already in chapter 1 ("Systematic and

Narrative Thought: Eternity and Closure in Structure and Story”), different themes emerge: Collins indicates an interest in the role of time itself as a “proximate” as well as an “ultimate” referent in Pali narratives (p. 15), and poses the idea that “Nirvana provides closure” in both systematic and narrative thinking (or “mental/textual process,” as Collins states on page 15). This book, then, is a multi-faceted study of Nirvana according to the Pali textual tradition, the major themes being: the position of Nirvana in both systematic and narrative thought; the relationship between these different styles of discourse; the use of imagery in the Pali tradition, and how it connects systematic and narrative thinking; the “closure” provided by Nirvana; and the role of time in narrative texts.

Collins’ explanation of these themes is for the most part convincing: many of his points are well-made and require little further argumentation. His ideas about imagery being a bridge between systematic and narrative thought make good sense, for example in the story of the final Nirvana of the monk Dabba Mallaputta (from the *Udāna*, on which see chapter 4, “Nirvana, Time, and Narrative”). After informing the Buddha of his intention to enter final Nirvana, Dabba does so by rising into the air cross-legged, attaining a meditative concentration on fire, and finally bursting into flames (pp. 124–25). In such cases the image of Nirvana as an extinguished fire connects systematic with narrative thought (p. 187). And since the image involves a temporal aspect—the event of a fire going out—it follows that abstract Pali thought is translated into a more comprehensive narrative medium, which makes a highly sophisticated soteriological idea easier to grasp.

The story of Dabba Mallaputta demonstrates another major theme of chapter 4, that is, that Nirvana provides a sense of “closure” in Pali narrative. For in such cases, where a person attains liberation at the end of a sermon (p. 123), Nirvana is a dramatic terminus point in “the time of narration.” Not all the evidence on Nirvana as “closure” is as convincing, however: it is not clear that Nirvana plays any such role in “the time of narration” (i.e., in the time it actually takes for a text to be read or narrated) when it is mentioned as “the climax of various series of epithets, synonyms, and sections within texts” or as “the climax to a list of meditational states” (p. 123). For in such cases no closure is obviously provided in the experience of those who read or hear the text. Moreover, when Nirvana features as “an aspiration for the audience added at the end of recitations,” or as “an aspiration for the audience at the end of sermons,” or even “as an aspiration by authors/redactors in the epilogue of their texts” (pp. 123–24), can it actu-

ally be considered to play any narrative role at all? Perhaps there is closure in some sense, but this has little to do with the actual narrative.

Apart from cases where the attainment of Nirvana coincides with the actual ending of a narrative, Collins presents the more challenging thesis that Nirvana provides a more subtle sense of narrative closure.

I call this sense of an ending, this closure, a *syntactic* element of Buddhist narrative(s), as opposed to *semantic*: whatever meaning may be explicitly represented in any given medium, nirvana as ultimate closure is always and everywhere a latent, structuring presence (p. 110).

Collins thus points towards the distinction between explicit and implicit statements of meaning in a narrative: what is actually stated in order to generate obvious meaning (the explicit statement of purpose), and what is implied by structure, the ideas and themes implicit in a narrative's movement, and so not confined to its stated purpose. But the evidence for this is not so clear. For example, Collins discusses endings in "narrated time" with regard to the idea of multiple Buddhas. He points out that the religious world created whenever Buddhas appear in the world instantiates

a general and continually repeated pattern. The master-text that narrates this beginningless and endless sequence transcribes eternity, in two senses: its cosmology extends time backwards and forwards endlessly, in the universe of conditioning, *saṃsāra*; and it is this that provides the discursive *Said* through which the *Unsaid*—eternity as timeless nirvana—is possible as an object of thought. Earlier I called nirvana the full stop (period) in the Buddhist story; now I can add that it is a full stop in an eternal story; a full stop which brings closure to individual lives in a master-text that itself can have no final ending (p. 121).

But is this actually the case? While it is possible that Nirvana provides a sense of implicit closure, Collins presents no argument in support of this hypothesis, whereas other interpretations of the evidence are plausible. Indeed the myth of past and future Buddhas (p. 105ff) suggests that Buddhism is a repetitive feature of the universe, and if so, it could be supposed that there is no such thing as "closure" at all. Instead, perhaps the role of Nirvana in such narratives is to provide a periodic infusion of unconditioned truth into a world which is otherwise inherently unsatisfactory. If so,

it is quite possible that Nirvana plays the narrative role not of closure, but rather provides an ongoing sense of continuity through the medium of Buddhas periodically tapping into the timeless essence of Nirvana. Understood in this way, Buddhism would seem to be a religious institution through which the sacred is forever mediated to an otherwise profane world, one in which sentient beings are trapped in the ongoing drama of *samsāra*.

Evidence for this alternative interpretation is contained in chapter 5 ("Past and Future Buddhas"), in which Collins considers "narrative as an expression and embodiment of temporality" (p. 126). Given the argument of chapter 4, it is peculiar that hardly anything is said about "closure" in this chapter. But this is because the *vaṃsa* texts studied, especially the *Buddhavaṃsa*, have nothing much to say about this subject. Collins mentions that all the *Buddhavaṃsa*'s chapters end with verses on the achievement of Nirvana by each of the different Buddhas (p. 140), which brings closure to the narrated events (p. 147), but even in the sections of the *Buddhavaṃsa* and *Anāgatavaṃsa* translated in the appendices, the attainment of final Nirvana at death by individual Buddhas is generally passed over with minimal comment: the first chapter of the *Buddhavaṃsa* begins after the Buddha's Nirvana (p. 155); chapter 2 mentions nothing about the Nirvana of Dīpaṅkara; chapter 3 fails to mention Kondañña's attainment of Nirvana when outlining his spiritual career, and has only one functional verse on his final attainment of Nirvana (p. 169), and so on. The realization of Nirvana during life or of final Nirvana does not seem to be an important part of the narrative, the focus instead being on time and the ongoing Buddhist institution. Exactly this point is noted by Collins as follows:

In these texts the passage of both non-repetitive and repetitive time is not merely, so to speak, a canvas on which the (hi)stories are painted, a ground against which events occur as figure, or the stage on which the dramas unfold, but rather is itself an important part of what is portrayed, a figure brought forward for attention and reflection, a character that should be acknowledged in a list of *dramatis personae* (p. 138).

This does not suggest that Nirvana plays any significant role in providing a syntactic sense of closure, for the implicit point of narrative texts such as the *Buddhavaṃsa* seems to be that Buddhism has no end, but is rather a glorious, never-ending manifestation of religious truth. That in turn explains the *Buddhavaṃsa*'s over-the-top descriptions of worldly beauty and splendor during the actual lifetime of a Buddha (see pp. 168–69 on Kondañña),

and even the very notion of the future Buddha Metteyya (see Collins' translation of the *Anāgatavaṃsa*, p. 172–84), by means of whom the Pali tradition envisions Buddhism as a permanent, repetitive feature of the cosmos.

This putative reading of the narrative role of Nirvana does not necessarily rule out Collins' notions that Nirvana provides closure, however. After all, Pali narrative literature is diverse and complex, and surely contains multiple themes. What is peculiar in Collins' presentation is not his ideas about closure, which are sensible if only partly substantiated, but rather that he insists on a single interpretive approach. Why this belief in a homogeneous and one-dimensional narrative tradition? This is unfortunately a consequence of Collins' synchronic study of Pali texts, a problem encapsulated by what he calls the "Pali imaginaire." According to him, an imaginaire is "a non-material, imaginative world constituted by texts, especially works of art and literature" (p. 4). While there is nothing particularly contentious about this concept, the scope of its application to Pali literature is problematic. For Collins the "Pali imaginaire" consists of

any and every text written (or translated into) Pali. I think it is a matter of empirical fact that, as far as the grand issues of life, death, suffering, and nirvana are concerned, all texts in Pali show a remarkable consistency, and can be treated as a single whole (pp. 4–5).

Collins qualifies this sweeping statement by drawing attention to diverse notions on karma, rebirth, and liberation (p. 5), which create serious problems for the idea of a homogeneous Pali tradition. For if there are differences about such fundamentally important issues, how can the tradition be called remarkably consistent? Surely the attempt to read Pali texts in a consistent manner will only distort the meaning of at least some of them. Such a reading will tend to simplify complexity and thereby bypass multiple voices in the Pali tradition, quite possibly by accepting the tradition's own exegesis in some cases. Exactly these problems appear in Collins' treatment of Nirvana: his study of Pali narrative (chapters 4 and 5) simplifies complexity whereas his study of Nirvana as a concept and image (chapters 2 and 3, respectively) applies a single interpretive model to a broad collection of Pali texts, following Theravada orthodoxy.

The latter problem is clearest in chapter 3 ("Nirvana as an Image"), in Collins' discussion of the image of Nirvana as a fire gone out. By following the traditional interpretation that this image refers to the final Nirvana achieved at death of an already enlightened person, he misunderstands a

number of canonical teachings, such as the following statement of the Buddha in the *Suttanipāta* (verse no. 1074):

*accī yathā vātavegena khittā, atthaṃ paleti na upeti saṅkhaṃ,
evaṃ muni nāmakāyā vimutto atthaṃ paleti na upeti saṅkhaṃ.*

This is translated by Collins as follows:

Just as a flame put out by a gust of wind
goes down and is beyond reckoning,
so the sage free from name-and-form
goes down and is beyond reckoning (pp. 67 and 81).

Such a translation implies that the liberated sage cannot be defined once he has left his body (“form”), that is, has achieved final Nirvana at death. But this is a mistake: since the word *kāyā* is declined in the singular case, the liberated sage cannot be liberated from “name-and-form” (for which a plural ending would be required), but is rather liberated “from the category (*kāyā*) name (*nāma*).”¹ The verse therefore comments on the transformed mental state of the liberated person, which is such that he cannot be defined even in life. The same point is made in the *Aggi Vacchagotta Sutta*, where the Buddha uses the term “Tathāgata” throughout and makes it clear that he is referring to himself, although Collins again assumes that in this teaching the Buddha refuses to define the dead Arahant (pp. 68; 83–84).²

In reading these texts according to Theravada orthodoxy, Collins misunderstands the radical apophatic strand of the Pali tradition, according to which nothing positive can be said about the liberated person’s existential state even while he is alive, never mind after death. This means, of course, that the liberating experience of Nirvana is ineffable, as is the condition of the person who realizes it. Despite this, Collins reads the traditional understanding into the canonical discourses, and so states the understanding that Nirvana “exists” as an unconditioned *dhamma* (p. 47). Collins further accepts the traditional doctrines that the self/soul (*ātman*) does not exist (p. 43) and that Nirvana is morally indeterminate (p. 44), despite the fact that these ideas are barely stated in the canonical discourses. The evidence of the

¹ On this point see Alexander Wynne, *The Origin of Buddhist Meditation*, pp. 90–94 (Abingdon, Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2007).

² On this teaching see *ibid.*, pp. 95–96. Also see *ibid.*, p. 92, for the translation of the *Anguttara-nikāya*, vol. 2, 198.30, etc., which is to be preferred to that given by Collins (p. 63). The passage in question is an insight meditation sort of contemplation, and not a description of a liberated person’s condition.

Udāna on Nirvana as an existent (pp. 47–48) is peculiar and resembles early Upaniṣadic statements about *brahman*—it is unrepresentative of the early tradition, and was probably borrowed from an early Brahminic source.³

The possibility that the early understanding of Nirvana was influenced, at least for some Buddhist thinkers, by early Brahminic thought, might explain the fact that according to Theravada orthodoxy, Nirvana is morally indeterminate. For this is exactly how *brahman/ātman* is conceptualized in the early Upaniṣads,⁴ whereas the early Buddhist texts do not obviously imply an amoral understanding of Nirvana. Collins, however, accepts the orthodox idea in his discussion (p. 44) of the Pali evaluation of moral action as either meritorious/good (*puñña*) versus demeritorious/bad (*pāpa*), or wholesome/skilful (*kusala*) versus unwholesome/unskilful (*akusala*). Whereas the liberated person must of course be devoid of action that is both *pāpa* and *akusala*, according to Collins it does not follow that such a person can be defined in terms of their opposites, *puñña* and *kusala*. Collins states that this is because although all that is *puñña* is *kusala*, all that is *kusala* is not necessarily *puñña*, meaning that the enlightened person's action is skilful but cannot be classed as meritorious/good since this action has no karmic consequence. As Collins puts it, “the mental states and actions of a person who has attained nirvana in life are entirely good, in the sense of skilful, without Corruptions” (p. 44).

True, a Buddha or Arahant escapes karmic retribution, even that created by the morally good acts that entail a more favorable sort of personal continuity (which are often termed *puñña* in the canonical texts). But does this mean that a Buddha is good merely in the sense of being “skilful” (*kusala*), that he is a psychological technician accomplished in the means of helping people, without actually having moral feelings such as love and compassion? This is not the general picture of the canonical discourses, where the word *kusala* cannot be reduced to the sense of “skilful,” but also means something like “morally good” or “virtuous.”⁵ In fact the early evidence inclines

³ On this point see Wynne (ibid., p. 115).

⁴ See the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* IV.4.5–7, which relates good (*puṇya*) and bad (*pāpa*) action to desire (*kāma*), and states that the realization of *brahman* occurs when a person is rid of all desire.

⁵ See Damien Keown, *The Nature of Buddhist Ethics* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 116–28, especially p. 119: “*Kusala* qualities partake of *nibbāna*, and their cultivation transforms an ordinary man (*puthujjana*) into an *Arahat*. Such qualities both reflect and promote the final good—they are virtues—and the most natural translation for *kusala* when used in a moral context is ‘virtue’ or ‘goodness.’” See also Keown (ibid., pp. 72–82) on “The Buddha’s Compassion.”

towards the position that the experience of Nirvana is one in which a person becomes irreversibly good,⁶ and if so the experience of Nirvana cannot be morally indeterminate (*avyākata*), as it is conceived in the Pali Abhidhamma and commentaries (see p. 44).

All this should indicate that reading canonical Pali texts through the prism of Theravada thought can be seriously misleading. Such a study is bound to impose orthodox ideas on the early literature, for example that Nirvana is an unconditioned existent which transcends all that is conditioned. By applying this idea to the canonical literature—and even developing it into the notion that Nirvana has a conceptual and narrative role of “closure”—Collins gives a misleading impression of the content of early Pali texts, and misses other important dimensions of early Buddhist thought. Because of his idea of a Pali “imaginaire,” then, Collins reduces the entire content of Pali systematic thinking about Nirvana to a single, unrepresentative point.

This is not to say that the idea of a single Pali imaginaire is entirely misconceived, however, for some ideas are common to all Pali literature, for example the basic idea that all which is conditioned is impermanent. But this universal truth about the human condition concerns not only the basic elements of existence and experience, but also more complex structures such as cultures, ideas, and even “imaginaires.” While the notion of a homogeneous imaginaire might be useful at a very general level, it is not suitable for higher text-critical studies. To read the canonical Pali discourses as if they express the standpoint of orthodox Theravada is as misleading as the notion that the New Testament is entirely consistent with Roman Catholic theology. It follows that the notion of a “Pali imaginaire” is unsuitable for the critical study of canonical Pali texts, just as the notion of a “Latin imaginaire” would be for a critical study of the Gospels. To pretend otherwise, and so ignore the fact that the scholarly study of Pali literature is a branch of history, imposes unnecessary limits on any attempt to understand the Pali tradition.

⁶ See Keown (ibid., p. 124): “An *Arahat* is perfect in virtue and for him the experiential consequences of virtue cannot fluctuate. As he has maximised his ethical potential there can be no increase or decrease in his virtue or in his happiness. He is completely good, and happiness, according to Buddhism, is tied to goodness.”